

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

First, I would like to offer all of you an affectionate greeting. I am happy to be among you once again and to celebrate Holy Mass with you. I am also happy to revisit familiar places which had a decisive influence on my life, shaping my thoughts and feelings: places where I learned how to believe and how to live. This is a time to say thanks to all those - living and deceased - who guided and accompanied me along the way. I thank God for this beautiful country and for all the persons who have made it truly my homeland.

We have just listened to the three biblical readings which the Church's liturgy has chosen for this Sunday. All three develop a double theme which is ultimately one, bringing out - as circumstances dictate - one or another of its aspects. All three readings speak of God as the center of all reality and the center of our personal life. "Here is your God!", exclaims the prophet Isaiah (35:4). In their own way, the *Letter of James* and the Gospel passage say the very same thing. They want to lead us to God, to set us on the right path. But to speak of "God" is also to speak of society: of our shared responsibility for the triumph of justice and love in the world. This is powerfully expressed in the second reading, in which James, a close relative of Jesus, speaks to us. He is addressing a community beginning to be marked by pride, since it included affluent and distinguished persons, and consequently the risk of indifference to the rights of the poor. James's words give us a glimpse of Jesus, of that God who became man. Though he was of Davidic, and thus royal, stock, he became a simple man in the midst of simple men and women. He did not sit on a throne, but died in the ultimate poverty of the Cross. Love of neighbour, which is primarily a commitment to justice, is the touchstone for faith and love of God. James calls it "the royal law" (cf. 2:8), echoing the words which Jesus used so often: the reign of God, God's kingship. This does not refer to just any kingdom, coming at any time; it means that God must become the force shaping our lives and actions. This is what we ask for when we pray: "Thy Kingdom come". We are not asking for something off in the distance, something we may not even want to experience. Rather, we pray that God's will may here and now determine our own will, and that in this way God can reign in the world. We pray that justice and love may become the decisive forces affecting our world. A prayer like this is surely addressed first to God, but it is also unsettling for us. Really, is this what we want? Is this the direction in which we want our lives to move? For James, "the royal law", the law of God's kingship, is also "the law of freedom": if we follow God in all that we think and do, then we draw closer together, we gain freedom and thus true fraternity is born. When Isaiah, in the first reading, speaks about God, he goes on to speak about salvation for the suffering, and when James speaks of the social order as a necessary expression of our faith, he logically goes on to speak of God, whose children we are.

But now we must turn our attention to the Gospel, which speaks of Jesus' healing of a man born deaf and mute. Here too we encounter the two aspects of this one theme. Jesus is concerned for the suffering, for those pushed to the margins of society. He heals them and, by enabling them to live and work together, he brings them to equality and fraternity. This obviously has something to say to all of us: Jesus points out the goal of all our activity. Yet the whole story has a deeper dimension, one which the Fathers of the Church constantly brought out, one which particularly speaks to us today. The Fathers were speaking to and about the men and women of their time. But their message also has new meaning for us modern men and women. There is not only a physical deafness which largely cuts people off from social life; there is also a "hardness of hearing" where God is concerned, and this is something from which we particularly suffer in our own time. Put simply, we are no longer able to hear God - there are too many different frequencies filling our ears. What is said about God strikes us as pre-scientific, no longer suited to our age. Along with this hardness

of hearing or outright deafness where God is concerned, we naturally lose our ability to speak with him and to him. And so we end up losing a decisive capacity for perception. We risk losing our inner senses. This weakening of our capacity for perception drastically and dangerously curtails the range of our relationship with reality. The horizon of our life is disturbingly foreshortened.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus put his fingers in the ears of the deaf-mute, touched the sick man's tongue with spittle and said "*Ephphatha*" - "Be opened". The Evangelist has preserved for us the original Aramaic word which Jesus spoke, and thus he brings us back to that very moment. What happened then was unique, but it does not belong to a distant past: Jesus continues to do the same thing anew, even today. At our Baptism he touched each of us and said "*Ephphatha*" - "Be opened" -, thus enabling us to hear God's voice and to be able to talk to him. There is nothing magical about what takes place in the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism opens up a path before us. It makes us part of the community of those who are able to hear and speak; it brings us into fellowship with Jesus himself, who alone has seen God and is thus able to speak of him (cf. *Jn* 1:18): through faith, Jesus wants to share with us his seeing God, his hearing the Father and his converse with him. The path upon which we set out at Baptism is meant to be a process of increasing development, by which we grow in the life of communion with God, and acquire a different way of looking at man and creation.

The Gospel invites us to realize that we have a "deficit" in our capacity for perception - initially, we do not notice this deficiency as such, since everything else seems so urgent and logical; since everything seems to proceed normally, even when we no longer have eyes and ears for God and we live without him. But it is true that everything goes on as usual when God no longer is a part of our lives and our world? Before raising any further questions, I would like to share some of my experience in meeting Bishops from throughout the world. The Catholic Church in Germany is outstanding for its social activities, for its readiness to help wherever help is needed. During their visits *ad Limina*, the Bishops, most recently those of Africa, have always mentioned with gratitude the generosity of German Catholics and ask me to convey that gratitude. Just recently, the Bishops of the Baltic Countries told me about how German Catholics assisted them greatly in rebuilding their churches, which were badly in need of repair after decades of Communist rule. Every now and then, however, some African Bishop will say: "If I come to Germany and present social projects, suddenly every door opens. But if I come with a plan for evangelization, I meet with reservations". Clearly some people have the idea that social projects should be urgently undertaken, while anything dealing with God or even the Catholic faith is of limited and lesser importance. Yet the experience of those Bishops is that evangelization itself should be foremost, that the God of Jesus Christ must be known, believed in and loved, and that hearts must be converted if progress is to be made on social issues and reconciliation is to begin, and if - for example - AIDS is to be combated by realistically facing its deeper causes and the sick are to be given the loving care they need. Social issues and the Gospel are inseparable. When we bring people only knowledge, ability, technical competence and tools, we bring them too little. All too quickly the mechanisms of violence take over: the capacity to destroy and to kill becomes the dominant way to gain power - a power which at some point should bring law, but which will never be able to do so. Reconciliation, and a shared commitment to justice and love, recede into the distance. The criteria by which technology is placed at the service of law and love are no longer clear: yet it is precisely on these criteria that everything depends: criteria which are not only theories, but which enlighten the heart and thus set reason and action on the right path.

People in Africa and Asia admire our scientific and technical prowess, but at the same time they are frightened by a form of rationality which totally excludes God from man's vision, as if this were the highest form of reason, and one to be imposed on their cultures too. They do not see the real threat to their identity in the Christian faith, but in the contempt for

God and the cynicism that considers mockery of the sacred to be an exercise of freedom and that holds up utility as the supreme moral criterion for the future of scientific research. Dear friends, this cynicism is not the kind of tolerance and cultural openness that the world's peoples are looking for and that all of us want! The tolerance which we urgently need includes the fear of God - respect for what others hold sacred. This respect for what others hold sacred demands that we ourselves learn once more the fear of God. This sense of respect can be reborn in the Western world only if faith in God is reborn, if God become once more present to us and in us.

We impose this faith upon no one. Such proselytism is contrary to Christianity. Faith can develop only in freedom. But we do appeal to the freedom of men and women to be open to God, to seek him, to hear his voice. As we gather here, let us here ask the Lord with all our hearts to speak anew his "*Ephphatha*", to heal our hardness of hearing for God's presence, activity and word, and to give us sight and hearing. Let us ask his help in rediscovering prayer, to which he invites us in the liturgy and whose essential formula he has given us in the Our Father.

The world needs God. We need God. But what God? In the first reading, the prophet tells a people suffering oppression that: "He will come with vengeance" (*Is* 35:4). We can easily suppose how the people imagined that vengeance. But the prophet himself goes on to reveal what it really is: the healing goodness of God. The definitive explanation of the prophet's word is to be found in the one who died on the Cross: in Jesus, the Son of God incarnate. His "vengeance" is the Cross: a "No" to violence and a "love to the end". This is the God we need. We do not fail to show respect for other religions and cultures, profound respect for their faith, when we proclaim clearly and uncompromisingly the God who counters violence with his own suffering; who in the face of the power of evil exalts his mercy, in order that evil may be limited and overcome. To him we now lift up our prayer, that he may remain with us and help us to be credible witnesses to himself. Amen!